

## EVALUATING HISTORIC RESOURCES

Once the historic district study committee has completed the historic resource survey of the proposed district, the study committee analyzes the data to determine:

- Historic (contributing) and non-historic (non-contributing) resources in the district
- National Register of Historic Places significance criteria the district meets
- Boundaries for the historic district

Study committees must follow the criteria and guidelines developed by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior for the National Register of Historic Places when evaluating historic resources. This summary is based on the National Park Service's *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria*.

### What is a Historic Resource?

A historic resource is typically at least fifty years old, although resources of lesser age may qualify if they can be shown to have exceptional significance. A historic resource can be a building, structure (bridge, water tower), object (fountain, sculpture), site (battlefield, cemetery), district (a group of related resources), feature (street lights, clock tower), or open space (park, village green) that is significant in history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, or culture at the local, state, or national level. A historic resource should retain a high degree of integrity that is comprised of seven qualities: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

The Secretary of the Interior provides the following definitions for historic and non-historic resources in Bulletin 15.

A contributing (**historic**) resource, is one that adds to the historic association, historic architectural quality, or archaeological values for which a property is significant because it was present during the period of significance, relates directly to the documented significance, and possesses historic integrity.

A non-contributing (**non-historic**) resource is one that does not add to the historic architectural qualities or historic association of a district because it was not present during the period of significance, does not relate to the documented significance, or due to alteration, additions, and other changes it no longer possesses historic integrity.

A **historic district** is defined as a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of resources united historically or aesthetically by plan or design. The district's identity is a result of the interrelationship between individual resources that work together to create a visual sense of its history.

### Historic Resources and their Broader Context

Individual resources and historic districts typically have little meaning when considered in isolation; they must be viewed in the larger context of the history and culture of their time and place. The history of a district identifies the significant themes and trends, time periods, people and events that shaped the development of a historic resource or district.

- **Historic Themes**

The U.S. Secretary of the Interior has identified thirty broad themes under which the majority of historic resources can be classified. They are:

Agriculture  
Architecture  
Archaeology  
Art  
Commerce  
Communication  
Community Planning &  
Development  
Conservation  
Economics  
Education  
Engineering  
Entertainment/Recreation  
Ethnic Heritage  
Exploration/Settlement  
Health/Medicine

Industry  
Invention  
Landscape Architecture  
Law  
Literature  
Maritime History  
Military  
Performing Arts  
Philosophy  
Politics/Government  
Religion  
Science  
Social History  
Transportation  
Other

Choosing the categories that best apply to the district under study will help the historic district study committee focus their research when developing the history of a district. Typically, more than one theme will apply to a resource or district. **Example:** a downtown commercial district may require researching the following themes to develop a complete history for the area: **Commerce** to determine the types of businesses that once existed there; **Architecture** to understand if the building styles are typical or unique or if the work of a noted architect is located in the district; **Ethnic Heritage** if the buildings display a construction style or technique associated with a specific culture such as German or Dutch; and **Transportation** if there is a major highway or a decorative bridge in the downtown.

The relationship of the existing resources to a theme should be noteworthy. For example, just because a doctor's office was located in a proposed district would not mean that the theme of health/medicine should be explored. However, if the doctor had done something of unusual significance, such as used his office building to start the county's first hospital or to develop a vaccine for small pox, then that theme should be researched.

These themes should serve as general guidelines to help give focus to the research effort. Do not try to slavishly fit every theme to your community—concentrate only on those that stand out and are important.

### Significant Time Periods

Significant time periods for the district and the resources in it should be identified in addition to the historic themes. A significant time period is the length of time a property was associated with an important event, activity or person. It can be one year or a range of years. There can be one or more period of significance for a resource or district. **Examples:** If a subdivision was platted in 1910 and houses continued to be built there at a steady rate until the Depression hit in 1930 when construction abruptly stopped, then the period of significance for the neighborhood would be 1910 to 1930. If a house is significant because of its association with a person, such as the Gerald Ford home in Grand Rapids, then the period of significance would be the time that the person lived there. If a downtown came into being because of a nearby lumbering operation, fell on hard times when the trees had all been cut, was revitalized at the turn of the century due to the rise of fruit farming in the surrounding area, suffered severe losses during the Depression but again saw boom times when a small factory was built in 1939 to aid war production during World War II, the periods of significance for the town might be 1870-1890 for the lumbering era; 1900-1930 for the agricultural era; and 1939-1946 for the World War II years. If a resource is significant because of a single event, such as a sit down strike that changed the way Michigan's automobile plants operated, the significant date would be the year of the event, such as 1932.

## Significant People

In addition to the significant themes and time periods, any significant people associated with a resource or district should be identified. **Example:** For an early twentieth century residential neighborhood the study committee might identify the original land owner who platted the subdivision; developers who promoted the subdivision; architects that designed houses, schools, or churches in the neighborhood; the landscape architect that planned the street patterns and parks; and people that lived in the subdivision and how they were influential in shaping the development of the community. This could range from the president of a major local industry to the company's workers who lived in a concentrated area.

It is important to be inclusive of women, minorities, and ethnic groups to give an accurate portrayal of the community's history.

## Significant Events

An event can be a specific, one-time occurrence such as the site of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech or the introduction of the assembly line to Ford's Piquette Avenue Plant in Detroit. It can also be a pattern of events such as the development of the railroad and the construction of railroad depots along the Michigan Central Railroad line.

When writing the history narrative for the study committee report, ask the basic questions of who, what, when, where, and why about the individual resources and/or district. Some sample questions to consider might be:

**Who** was the original owner? Did he/she hold a position of leadership or influence in the community and how? Who else is associated with the property and why were they important? Who was the architect or engineer? Is their work known at the state or national level? Were specialized craftsmen involved in the construction of the resource? If so, who were they and how did they come to be involved?

**What** events happened that helped to establish and shape the resource or district? Do the events reflect a regional trend or activity (copper mining, fishing or fruit farming) or a national trend such as the work done through federal relief projects like the WPA or CCC? What noteworthy events happened at the site? What part of its history makes the district stand out from other areas in the community? What are the character defining features of the resource that reflect its period of significance?

**When** was the resource/district constructed? When was it significant to the community? When did an important person or significant event occur there? Is there more than one significant time period related to the resource?

**Where** was the resource originally located? Is it on its original site? How does its physical or geographical location relate to its historic significance?

**Why** is this resource important to the community? Is the resource significant as a representative example of broad trends that occurred or because it is unique and the only example of a certain type of resource?

## Evaluating the Physical Integrity of the Resource

In addition to developing the historic context for the district and determining how the individual resources fit within it, the study committee must assess the physical condition of the individual resources within the district.

The Secretary of the Interior has identified seven qualities that work together to comprise integrity. They are:

- **Location** – the place where the resource was originally constructed or where a historic event took place. Moving a resource from its original location, except in rare cases, destroys the relationship between the resource and its historic association resulting in the loss of its integrity.
- **Design** – the combination of elements that create the form, plan, space, structure and style. Design is a result of planning, function, technology, and/or aesthetics. **Examples:** The footprint, massing, and scale of a Queen Anne home compared to that of a 1940s ranch house. A planned subdivision of curvilinear streets compared to the grid street pattern commonly found in Midwestern towns.
- **Setting** – the physical environment of a historic property. Setting is how and where a resource is situated in relationship to natural or man-made elements such as topography, vegetation, paths, open space or relationships to other buildings. **Example:** The old growth trees and historic streetlights and street signs lining a street in a 1920s residential suburb combine to create the setting for the neighborhood's houses. A small historic commercial fishing village built in 1890 is composed of one-story wood frame buildings fronted by a series of short wooden docks. The setting of this fishing village would be destroyed if a ten-story, glass hotel tower and a concrete and steel boat ramp were introduced.
- **Materials** – the combination of physical elements of a particular time period and/or pattern. When evaluating materials look at roofing, foundation, siding, windows and doors, porches and architectural details. A property should retain the majority of its original materials and distinguishing features that date from its period of historic significance. **Example:** The proposed district contains an 1870s Italianate house that retains its full-length front porch, segmental arched windows and window hoods, and decorative brackets, but its cupola has been removed. The cupola is just one of the major features that make this an Italianate-style house. Because the house still retains the majority of the stylistic elements that define it as Italianate, it would still be considered a contributing historic resource. However, if all the detail elements (porch, window hoods, cupola and brackets) had been removed when the house was vinyl sided in the 1980s and an addition was placed on the house so that its massing was changed, it would no longer retain its material integrity and would be considered non-historic.

Some additions and changes to historic properties acquire historic significance over time.

**Example:** if an 1870s storefront was modernized in 1932 with Art Deco carrerra glass, the alteration has probably become significant in its own right as an example of the Art Deco style.

It is sometimes difficult to assess changes to simple vernacular buildings such as an upright and wing gable front house that has been vinyl sided. In this situation an assessment might include determining the amount of ornamentation the property originally had and what is now missing. Chances are there weren't many "extras" on the property in the first place and if it retains its original window and door openings and massing it might still be considered historic.

- **Workmanship** – the physical evidence of the craft of a particular culture or people during any given period in history or prehistory. This could include stone masonry, carving, joinery, and decorative finishes. **Example:** In 1880 stonemasons from Italy were brought to a Michigan town to lay marble flooring and create carved decorations for a county courthouse. When that work was completed, some of the craftsman remained in the

community and their work can be found in mansions, churches and other civic buildings in the town.

- **Feeling** – the expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time. Feeling is the result of the combination of the presence of design, materials, workmanship and setting. **Example:** In the 1930s, Michigan's state park buildings built by the CCC were designed in a "rustic" architecture of log and stone that was intended to blend into the natural landscape. Demolishing a stone CCC constructed bathhouse and replacing it with a prefabricated metal structure would alter the rustic feeling of the park that was achieved through the use of natural materials.
- **Association** – the direct link between a resource and a historic event or person.

To qualify as a historic resource, a resource should retain a high degree of the distinctive physical materials and definitive features that reflect the way it looked during its period of significance. A few examples of the types of questions to ask when assessing a resource's integrity are:

- What are the essential physical features or characteristics that must be present for the property to have maintained its integrity? Are these physical characteristics visible enough to convey the resource's significance? All resources undergo change over time so some change is inevitable. But what is the extent of the change?
- Should the resource be compared to other resources of a similar type in the proposed district or at the regional, state or national level? Is it a common or unique resource?  
**Examples:** A stone church is one example of the work of a local artisan that built schools, homes, and other buildings in a three county area. His work is unique to the region. Another example might be a barn type that is uncommon in Michigan but is commonly found in Vermont where the builder came from.
- Which of the seven aspects of integrity are most relevant to the significance of the property? Not all will weigh equally. If the resource is important for its association with an event, not its architecture, then it may not be as important that it has retained all its significant architectural features. It must, however, retain enough integrity that you still get a sense of what it was like during the period of its significance.

### National Register of Historic Places Evaluation Criteria

Developing the historic context of a district through determining the significant events, people and time periods associated with it and assessing the physical integrity of the resource will enable the study committee to apply the eligibility criteria developed by the Secretary of the Interior for the National Register of Historic Places. The four main criteria are:

**Criterion A: Events** - association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or

**Criterion B: People** - association with the lives of persons significant in our past; or

**Criterion C: Design/Construction** - embodies the distinctive characteristic of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master or that possesses high artistic values, or that represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction

**Criterion D: Information** - yields or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history. *(Note: this typically applies to archaeology sites.)*

More than one of the criteria may apply to the district. The study committee report should contain a clear statement of which of the above criteria the district meets and why.

## Historic Resource Evaluation Results

Once the significant themes, time periods, people and associations have been identified, the historic district study committee will be able determine which resources have historic significance and then assess their physical integrity to determine if they still reflect that significance. The result will be:

- **Resource Lists**

- A list of historic resources by street number and address
- A list of non-historic resources by street number and address

- **Significance Statement**

The study committee will be able to develop a significance statement that clearly states which of the National Register eligibility criteria the overall district meets. **Example:** "The Howard Street Historic District is significant under National Register Criterion B for its association with Henry Ford who constructed these homes for workers in his Howard Street auto plant. It is also significant under National Register Criterion C as a representative example of the Arts and Crafts bungalow style homes popular in the early twentieth century."

- **District Boundaries**

Boundaries for historic districts are determined by geography, the concentration of resources that retain their integrity, and historic significance. Evaluating the individual resources within their historic context and for their material integrity will greatly facilitate the determination of the final boundaries for the proposed district.